

# Report on a conference not attended The scalpel beneath the suture

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There is an old story about the medical profession — that being someone's "colleague" means not telling when you find their scalpel inside your ailing patient. We refuse to be colleagues. There is a scalpel beneath this suture. We have seen it.

This past winter the normally sleepy world of academic film studies witnessed a considerable brouhaha surrounding a conference organized for 20th Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, by British theorist Stephen Heath. Acting out of political conviction and a strong sense of self-respect, a number of people, including some JUMP CUT staff members, joined in a protest of the conference's elitism and sexism. This criticism reflects a growing sentiment against the "business as usual" and "boy's club" atmosphere of cinema studies.

In a previous JUMP CUT report ("The Signifier that Failed to Make Milwaukee Famous," JC 10/11), Chuck Kleinhans criticized an earlier UW-M film conference. Since this year's conference leader, Stephen Heath, was aware of radical and liberal skepticism about Milwaukee events in the past, in spring 1977 he announced that the February 1978 meeting would be different: Six to eight months in advance, an overview position paper outlining the central topic ("The Cinematic Apparatus: Technology as Historical and Ideological Form") and a detailed bibliography of pertinent readings would be sent out, allowing people to prepare for the event. This way the conference would provide a learning situation rather than the usual closed dialogue. Heath added that the perspective of the conference would be Marxist. Further information, however, never came — nor the promised papers. Finally, in mid-October an extensive promotional mailing went out to the U.S. film studies community announcing the conference, four major speakers (Heath; French film semiotician Christian Metz; British theorist and

filmmaker Peter Wollen; and Jean-Louis Comolli, filmmaker and *Cahiers du cinéma* critic), and two major films (RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX by Laura Mulvey and Wollen, and Comolli's LA CECILIA — reviewed in JC 2/13). The announcement and a cover letter invited participation

At this juncture a number of people, including JUMP CUT staff, criticized the exclusive selection of men as conference all-stars which overlooked many qualified women. As conference plans became clearer, the number, variety, and intensity of criticisms increased, focusing especially on issues of sexism, elitism, the narrowness of the topic, and the selection process for the 75 participants. As final plans for the conference were set in mid-December, a number of people came to the conclusion that their criticisms, given in good faith, had no meaningful effect. From an initial suspicion that the conference was just poorly planned and could be corrected, many of us came to the conclusion that the final form of the meeting was Heath and those working with him to validate their own special line — Lacanian psychoanalysis — and that the conference structure would be even more sexist and elitist than the average academic conference. Consequently, the Chicago JUMP CUT group, asked to make a presentation, turned down the offer and circulated a one-page statement criticizing the conference. The following is a detailed presentation of JUMP CUT's criticisms of the conference.

The extraordinary elitism of the conference appeared most clearly in two ways: the process of selecting the participants and the form of the meeting itself. The selection process was overlaid with a peculiar double message. While the event was to be limited to a select 75, the basis for choosing participants and papers was never made clear. At the same time, national publicity for the meeting interested many people in the conference who were later excluded. The effect of this publicity was to give widespread notice of exclusion, tantalizing the many to ensure a very high profile for a select few. Such manipulation serves largely to inflate the self-importance of the organizers. Even the recent ultra-bourgeois, ultra-academic Harvard conference on "Bergman and Dreams," which also restricted numbers, clearly announced a deadline date and a first-come, first-serve admissions policy.

Just the opposite with Milwaukee: its flyer carefully stated the conference would be selective, but it gave no criteria for selection. It turned out that invitations were issued largely on a personal basis via long distance phone calls from the conference organizers, triggered by personal suggestions from their own contacts. The clear assumption of such an "invitational" procedure is that all intelligent, interested potential attendees are already known by the organizers, and that virtually all the important serious work is being done by high profile white male academics who are friendly to the French psychoanalytic line of Jacques Lacan.

No women were invited to speak at the conference until criticism of this policy was made in the most vehement terms by JUMP CUT staffers. Students could attend only if sponsored by invited faculty and then only three per select teacher. No preliminary notice was given that filmmakers and their work would be welcome. And the organizers made no attempt to contact the broad range of experimental filmmakers whose films might have a direct bearing on the conference topic. Instead, Heath went so far as to accept a film that was not even completed when accepted, apparently on the sole basis that one of the makers was a close friend. Other details confirm the conclusion that the true basis for selection came almost exclusively from whom you knew, not what you knew.

Attempts to work cooperatively with Heath were constantly thwarted by his intransigence. For example, in July, Northwestern University film faculty decided to coordinate a graduate seminar with the conference topic. Preliminary inquiries were made then about the topic, the bibliography, position paper, and student attendance. Heath evaded giving any straight answers to repeated inquiries until Saturday, December 17. At that time Chuck Kleinhans, who was to teach the seminar, was told that he could only bring three students and that he must name them by Monday. Kleinhans explained that the NU quarter had ended, that students had left the campus, that any selection would have to be made in consultation with other faculty and students, and that those who had registered for the seminar would not be known until the first day of class, January 3, at which time names could be provided. Not good enough, he was told by conference associate director, Teresa de Lauretis — the conference schedule and participant list had to be fixed immediately. On Monday, Kleinhans explained again the impossibility of providing three names and asked that three spaces be held for NU students, explaining as well JUMP CUT's decision to not attend the meeting. In reaction to JUMP CUT's withdrawal, the NU students were excluded from the conference. (Subsequent efforts by NU faculty to negotiate a solution were met with the Bureaucratic Shuffle — the students concerned were put on a "waiting list" and never admitted).

At this point the conference organizers must have realized that they would finally be held accountable for their irresponsible planning and elitist organization, for they attempted to obscure the fundamental nature of the event with several cosmetic adjustments. Last minute invitations were made to leftists and women — some of whom had never even applied to attend. The preliminary program that was sent out in January gave the superficial appearance of female participation but in reality almost all the key spots were held by men. Nevertheless, many saw through these fancy maneuvers. Charles F. Altman, associate professor of French at Iowa decided not to attend, noting that those excluded feel — and have every right to feel — that they have been dealt with insensitively and undemocratically. Indeed they have every reason

to think — and here lies the conference's constitutive paradox — that they have been treated according to an autocratic lecturing/listening mode by the very group supposedly supporting a democratic participation-oriented ethos. How can equality of status be maintained in a conference which pays a limited number of foreign lecturers to attend, while exacting from all others, including local lecturers, a stiff registration fee? How can the gesture of exclusion, as practiced by the organizers of this year's conference, avoid establishing a class system within the academic film establishment? In short, the techniques for organizing, publicizing, and delimiting the conference undermine the very goals which the organizers had originally announced.

The high-handed mode of selection was reinforced by the very form of the conference. A set of interlocking factors exhibited a deep elitism. While the meeting was supposed to discuss very complex theory in a high-level way, the organizers left the topic deliberately vague so that people had to read between the lines to figure out what the conference was about. Clearly it was not about technology — the announced title. That topic cloaked the considerably more controversial one of contemporary French psychoanalytic criticism. Because of this vagueness many potential contributors — particularly ones who might challenge the Lacanian orthodoxy — did not try to participate, ensuring that the inner circle would dominate the event. While initially it seemed that poor organization was the main reason the promised position paper and bibliography were not sent out in advance, in retrospect it appears that this material would have revealed the organizers' bias and provided the opportunity for others to refute it — something they clearly did not want. The promise that guest speakers would send out their papers in advance was not kept, while the bibliography was meager and very late (after attendance was closed). Thus people who could have made good contributions had no opportunity to prepare thought-out positions.

The conference was clearly set up not only to validate its "heavies" but also to actively discourage other points of view. Clearly, to have 75 people in one room listen for the first time to a prepared paper on high level theory and then to debate it without adequate study does not promote learning or the genuine exchange of ideas. Without papers in advance and small group discussion — at least as a supplement (suggestions JUMP CUT repeatedly made before withdrawing) — the situation encourages extreme aggressivity rather than deliberate and considered thought. The Milwaukee conference was designed to validate Lacanian psychoanalysis. Its net result was to reinforce the status quo of the big shots, to footnote their established positions, to expand the discipleship of True Believers, and to block any opposition, contradiction, or even innocently divergent opinions. According to post-conference reports, the very form of the meeting substituted for "dialogue" the choice of patting each other on the back or slapping each other across the face. Only 20 people talked at the event with any

regularity or frequency. Clearly the event could have been staged for those 20 — or it could have been opened to 500 to listen to those 20.

The absence of women from the promulgated list of major speakers doubtless served as warning to many women who might have gone. Repeated criticisms of this by JUMP CUT staffers and others had little effect on the organizers. (Heath even took pride in telling Kleinhans that he, Heath, was "above tokenism" and saw no problem at all with an all-male program.) When it became clear that JUMP CUT was going to blow the whistle on these antics, a fast back-peddling took place. Some women were invited to the conference who had expressed no previous interest; a flurry of phone calls inserted females into the program; and although papers submitted by women were rejected, a few women were given tertiary positions in the patriarchal order. Professor T. Kaori Kitao, chairperson of the Art Department at Swarthmore, recognized what was happening and withdrew from the conference, explaining in a letter to JUMP CUT:

"In the end I decided to withdraw; it is patent that the position of moderator is a subservient one. I could not envision it in any other way than secretarial, gratuitous, and humiliating. It is rather likely that the moderator will only introduce the speakers, receive questions from the floor, and summarize the arguments; but he/she will have little opportunity to comment, analyze, and retort. And it does indeed seem women have been typecast to this position at this conference."

Thus, despite the presence of individual women, there was an absence of strong feminist politics at the conference itself. Structure and pre-selection inhibited any collective female action to counteract the patriarchal order. The conference repeated the mechanisms of academic paternalism described by Adrienne Rich in her essay "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women" (*Heresies* 3):

"Many women have known the figure of the male 'mentor' who guides and protects his female student or colleague, tenderly opening doors for her into the common world of men. He seems willing to share his power, to conspire with her in stealing what Celia Gilbert names ... 'the sacred fire' of work. Yet what can he really bestow but the illusion of power, a power stolen, in any case, from the mass of women, over centuries, by men? He can teach her to name her experience that may allow her to live, work, perhaps succeed in the common world of men. But he has no key to the powers she might share with other women."

The conference organizers know very well that the strongest and most consistent challenge to Lacanian psychoanalysis has come from

American radical feminists (see, for example, Julia Lesage's critique of *Screen*'s psychoanalytic sexism, "The Human Subject — You, He, or Me? or The Case of the Missing Penis," JC 4; "Reply," by Heath, Colin McCabe, and Ben Brewster, JC 9; and Kleinhans, "A Ventriloquist Psychoanalysis," JC 9). To preserve the sanctity of their hidden agenda, the conference organizers maneuvered to ensure that a strong united feminist voice could not be heard, just as they did not include the promised Marxist perspective. This is not so surprising, for feminism and Marxism are antithetical to elitism.

One of the most bankrupt aspects of the conference, and one that serves to explain why some of the aforementioned antics took place, was that before the mid-October publicity ever went out calling for participation, the proceedings were substantially decided in advance so that they could be published in book form. The institutional, monetary reason for this kind of decision reveals a bond which grows ever tighter between the liberal arts and the state in the USA. In this century, the sciences such as physics and biology have funded much of their programs from grants, but only recently have liberal arts conferences also brought in big bucks to the university. Now both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts have sections in their funding apparatus specifically for conferences. University administrators, especially hard-pressed liberal arts deans, want the large "overhead" that is tacked on to any grant proposal to accrue to their institution. The NEA and the NEH demand that all proposals demonstrate their "spin-off" value — i.e., a major contribution must be made to an academic, artistic, or scientific field. And in the true spirit of social science empiricism, that contribution has to be demonstrated tangibly by means of post-conference attitude surveys, published articles, or, even better, a book. Over the last two years, papers from previous Milwaukee conferences have been published in periodicals.

For the director of the program, Michel Benamou, the fact of a book, irrespective of its worth, will offer more tangible proof to the deans and the National Endowment bureaucrats that these conferences indeed provide "substantial contributions to the field." The book, then, by its very existence, can become the basis upon which the program can demand further funding for future events. Heath worked out the major direction of the conference and the book over the summer with Professor David Bordwell of the Wisconsin-Madison campus. Thus the October call for participation was essentially phony. Legitimate submitted papers were rejected by this secret structure. The final shape of the volume will be dominated by the four "name" speakers and the U. of Wisconsin coterie. The real "product" of the conference is not a high level exchange of ideas but a prearranged film book. A new "authority" will now be encased in a book, which will, in turn, be held up for validation of future positions. This parody of scholarly inquiry affirms that the entire conference — from conception to final publication of the

"proceedings" was unnecessary. Such is the end result of a conference that could not be honest about its intentions.

Because the conference as it shaped up was even worse than the average academic meeting in terms of elitism and sexism, JUMP CUT withdrew from participation. We had spent several months of trying to change things through constructive criticism, assuming that the errors resulted from ignorance or neglect rather than design. "Working from within" just didn't work. Our initial criticisms were met with resistance, then with cosmetic changes, but the basic structure remained the same. Our initial action had some minor effect, and our withdrawal brought about further last minute changes. Although women were hurriedly added, the issue is clear for feminists. Because of feminist agitation, women are being offered a place in the patriarchy but only on the patriarchy's own terms — assimilation by invitation — and always, always, one at a time — the personal phone call certifying one's exceptionality, a touch of the scepter bestowing a little phallic power withheld from others of one's kind. The conference was so clearly compromised that editorial board members of JUMP CUT saw participation as collusion. Such conferences depend in some part on a token diversity. In this case a few radicals and feminists for local color validate the conference as "open" and "pluralistic."

Certainly there are situations when working from within can be an important tactic. But when the presumed audience for such an action is so thoroughly pre-packaged, and the agenda is so limited, only nonparticipation marks a sufficiently forceful and non-cooptable action. JUMP CUT's non-participation does not mean that we are 'anti-theory' or "anti-psychoanalysis." Anyone who reads JUMP CUT can see its commitment to developing theory and its willingness to present and discuss psychoanalytic work (we were, after all, the first English language publication to run a detailed report on Metz's work on psychoanalysis and film — John Finn, "Metz's New Directions" JC 6). But we refuse to get on the Lacanian bandwagon, to follow the latest fad, and to surrender basic political questions to enter the inner sanctum of psychoanalytic formalism without asking some fundamental questions. What basis is there for combining psychoanalysis and Marxism? Why is Lacan preferable to other revisionists of Freud? How can one account for and deal with the sexist basis of Freud's work? of Lacan's? What of the clear homophobia in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis? What is science, and in what way is psychoanalysis scientific? How do people change, especially in a deliberate way? We think these are open questions, and we welcome discussion and debate of them — from all sides — in the pages of JUMP CUT.

In contrast, the Milwaukee conference attempted to establish a hegemony for psychoanalysis in film theory without asking basic questions. In the closing session, doubts were expressed about Heath's

hidden agenda. For most participants the conference's net result seemed to be a flight from politics because the discussion tried to go on outside of history, outside of society, outside of politics, outside of discussing the politics of the conference itself. But conferences end, and history and politics go on. The questions remain: What are the class politics and feminist politics of those people promoting French psychoanalysis? What kind of conferences do they run? Who is invited and who is excluded? Who does the talking and who doesn't? What is being said, and what is being hidden? Let Heath and the others come forward and explain their politics — if it wouldn't be too embarrassing for them. Our pages are open, even if their conferences are closed.

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